

PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

VOL. I.

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NO. V.

THE PROGRESS OF KNOWLEDGE FATAL TO ERROR AND SUPERSTITION.

IT is in dark ages and in the dark intellects of individuals that error shoots up, extends its growth with rancorous rapidity, and spreads far and wide its direful and destructive effects. An important question has been frequently agitated, whether science be favorable to virtue? To this the answer ought to be given indubitably in the affirmative.—The apparent but rare exceptions which seem to be at war with this decision, cannot diminish in any high degree its force and correctness. But whether an accurate but close investigation into this subject should terminate in this case, in favor of the advocates of science, is not now a material point of inquiry; the connection subsisting between the cultivation of our faculties and the discovery of truth, must be apparent to every contemplative mind. In modern days, science and philosophy have attached themselves to many splendid and important truths, flowing or deducible from the view of the moral and physical world. These demonstrations and moral axioms have presented themselves in a formidable manner before the altar of superstition, and demanded of its votaries a refutation—if refutation were possible, by the powers and lights of theology. But christian theology admits of no improvements which stretch their influence beyond the opinions of the church, because, as Saint Athanasius intimates, the opinions and faith of the true church must be kept holy and undefiled, and the heretick who denies or disbelieves, without doubt, shall perish everlastingly. The opinion of some of the adherents to christianity, that revelation augments knowledge, ought to fall to the ground, upon the slightest review of the history of the christian church;

the learning and science that existed in the Roman empire at the introduction of christianity, were not the cause of accelerating its progress, or diffusing its doctrines over a considerable portion of Europe—but on the contrary, this religion became afterward the cause of destroying or surpressing that venerable accumulation of principles and of virtues, which the Roman philosophers had collected from past ages, and the energetic operation of their own faculties—neither was it the christian religion which caused the revival of learning and the love of science, which began to appear again during the fifteenth century. The historical anecdote which we published in a former number, concerning the immortal Galileo, is a strong and corroborating proof of this opinion—he knew and had demonstrated to his own satisfaction, that the sun is the centre of the planetary system—that the earth and all the other planets revolve at stated but different periods around this common center ; this was damnable heresy in the view of the christian church and its pious inquisitors, who assumed to be the agents of heaven for the special purpose of keeping holy and undefiled God's holy word, and who caused the venerable Galileo, that immortal philosopher of a dark but persecuting age, to appear before them upon his knees, formally to renounce one of the first and most solemn principles of philosophy, a principle which the church has since been constrained to acknowledge as true, and that it possesses a solid foundation in nature. The theories of Galileo, which at that time threw the church into such spasmodic consternation, were afterward undeniably demonstrated by the circumnavigation of the globe. This bold and enterprising specimen of human genius, while it marked with precision the relative position of the earth, in the solar system, collected also such a mass of facts relative to the Geography of the world and the moral state of nations, as surpassed all the ingenuity of ecclesiasticks to refute. Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon, was a declaration which after this cut but a poor figure in a book reputedly holy and divine. But superstition, rigid and tenacious, never abandons her grasp, till she is driven from her ground by the light of science and the force of public opinion.

Since geographical and philosophical sciences have become more extended, christian superstition has relaxed in the fury of its resentment, and the sun is now permitted to stand where it always did stand, in the center of the planetary system, diffusing light and heat to those bodies that perform periodical revolutions round this resplendant luminary. Is it to be presumed that a system

of religion which formerly made the earth stationary and the sun revolutionary, and which now reverses both positions, can be either true or divine? Can we believe, that in the system of nature, God has revealed one set of laws, and in the system of revelation countermanded this display of infinite wisdom! No, the writers of the bible system of religion were ignorant of the laws of nature—they judged solely by external appearance, and the common phenomena of the physical world became the basis of their decision. The sun appeared to rise and set—of course the sun, in their estimation, moved, and therefore the philosophy of Galileo which had placed the sun in the center immovable, was false and heretical. It was this circumstance that brought this wise and enlightened man, apparently in a state of humiliation, before a set of ignorant persecuting and christian inquisitors, to answer for pretended crimes of which he was never guilty.—They extorted, from him, it is true, a confession in favor of mother church and her holy doctrine—but the crime of declaring against the laws of nature, and the immutable order of the physical universe, must rest upon the heads of the inquisitors, and not upon the philosophic and immortal Galileo. Ye fanatics of the world, will ye ever learn wisdom from the harmonious works of the creator?—Will ye ever recognize the solemn truth that the sentiments of Galileo—the indestructible laws by which eternal wisdom governs the world, will one day annihilate superstition, and extend incalculably the sphere of human energy. It is the province of reason in opposition to superstition, to accomplish this important object, and confer upon man a new era in the history of his intellectual existence.

The three following paragraphs, taken from European publications, were politely handed to us by a friend.—

The first shews the apprehensions of the church in relation to the force of reason and the art of printing.

The second was written by a dissenting clergyman in England, and proves that graduated christianity may be at war with the ingredients of its own existence.—

The third pleasantly shews the foolishness of superstition.

TOWARDS the latter end of the reign of Louis XV. infidelity was so prevalent in France, that the higher dignitaries

of the church began to tremble for their offices. It was necessary on their own account to stay the torrent of infidel publications, and a remonstrance was presented to the king, through the medium of a prelate who did not believe even in the existence of a God, M. Lomerie, archbishop of Toulouse, in favor of the gospel, and the intolerant edicts of 1542, 1547 and 1551! "Your majesty is too well apprized," observe these pious petitions, "of the advantages which religion confers on nations, and above all, of the powerful support it yields to the authority of kings, not to consider impiety which endeavors to annihilate that support as the greatest scourge that can afflict your reign. We are on the eve of the fatal moment when the press will overturn the church and the state."

Who is to judge of error, you or I? You for me, or I for you, or each for himself? There is no safe ground of action except the leaving of every individual to judge for himself, and account to his master. I love the man who thinks for himself, think what he will. I honor the virtue of every one who dares to be free, and to shake off the petty tyranny of ecclesiastics, who bind the grievous burthens of tyrannical systems upon the conscience of another man's disciples;—disciples whom they neither created, nor redeemed, nor appointed to judge. My soul come not thou into their intolerant assembly!

As to personality in God, a trinity of persons, I think it the most absurd of all absurdities, and in my opinion a man who hath brought himself to believe the popular doctrine of the trinity, hath done all his work; for after that there can be nothing hard, nothing inevident; the more unintelligible the more credible, and as this serves the purpose of producing implicit faith in pretended guides, priests will always try to keep it in credit. The bible reads easy if we consider God one, Jesus the son of God, and the Holy Ghost the influence of God. But this would spoil trade, the scriptures would become plain and easy, and a learned priesthood would be unnecessary to make out and unfold that hard science. Christianity to us poor blind creatures. Verily, priestcraft is at the bottom of all this burlesque upon religion, for such I account the grimace of one man's pretending to take care of another man's soul. The direct end of all their schemes is to cheat people into a disuse of their own understandings, and to pitch their eyes and place their affections upon a frail and often a wicked proxy.

The night of Holy Thursday in the island of Corfu is remarkable for a superstition of a singular kind. Some people cause a shirt to be made for them on that night. The work must be performed by an odd number of Maidens, all named Mary, and the shirt begun at midnight must be cut out, sewed, washed and ironed before day—all which conditions being punctually observed, it is believed to possess the inestimable virtue of rendering the wearer invulnerable. Such shirts are very scarce.

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

(Continued from our last.)

THE promise of divine favor, instead of being partially confined to the posterity of Abraham, was universally proposed to the freeman and to the slave, to the Greek and to the Barbarian, to the Jew and to the Gentile. Every privilege that could raise the proselyte from Earth to Heaven, that could exalt his devotion, secure his happiness, or even gratify that secret pride, which under the semblance of devotion, insinuates itself into the human heart, was still reserved for the members of the Christian church—but at the same time all mankind was permitted, and even solicited, to accept the glorious distinction which was not only proffered as a favor but imposed as an obligation. It became the most sacred duty of a new convert to diffuse among his friends and relations the inestimable blessing which he had received, and to warn them against a refusal that would be severely punished as a criminal disobedience to the will of a benevolent but all-powerful deity.

The enfranchisement of the church from the bonds of the synagogue, was a work however of some time and of some difficulty. The Jewish converts, who acknowledged Jesus in the character of the Messiah, foretold by their ancient oracles, respected him as a prophetic teacher of virtue and religion; but they obstinately adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors, and were desirous of imposing them on the Gentiles, who continually augmented the number of believers. These Judaizing Christians seem to have argued with some degree of plausibility from the divine origin of the Mosaic law, and from the immutable perfections of its great author. They affirmed, that if the Being, who is the same through all eternity, had designed to abolish those sa-

ored rites which had served to distinguish his chosen people, the repeal of them would have been no less clear and solemn than their first promulgation: *that*, instead of those frequent declarations, which either suppose or assert the perpetuity of the Mosaic religion, it would have been presented as a provisional scheme intended to last only till the coming of the Messiah, who should instruct mankind in a more perfect mode of faith and of worship: *that* the Messiah himself, and his disciples who conversed with him on earth, instead of authorising by their example the most minute observances of the Mosaic law, would have published to the world the abolition of those useless and obsolete ceremonies, without suffering christianity to remain during so many years obscurely confounded among the sects of the Jewish church. Arguments like these appear to have been used in the defence of the expiring cause of the Mosaic law—but the industry of our learned divines has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the Old Testament, and the ambiguous conduct of the apostolic teachers. It was proper gradually to unfold the system of the gospel, and to pronounce with the utmost caution and tenderness a sentence of condemnation so repugnant to the inclination and prejudices of the believing Jews.

The history of the church of Jerusalem affords a lively proof of the necessity of those precautions, and of the deep impression which the Jewish religion had made on the minds of its sectaries. The first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the congregation over which they presided, united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ. It was natural that the primitive tradition of a church which was founded only forty days after the death of Christ, and was governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostles, should be received as the standard of orthodoxy. The distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of their venerable parent, and relieved her distresses by a liberal contribution of alms. But when numerous and opulent societies were established in the great cities of the empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, the reverence which Jerusalem had inspired to all the christian colonies insensibly diminished.—The Jewish converts, or as they were afterwards called, the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church, soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes, that from all the various religions of polytheism inlisted under the banner of Christ: and the Gentiles, who with the

approbation of their peculiar apostle, had rejected the intolerable weight of the Mosaic ceremonies, at length refused to their more scrupulous brethren the same toleration which at first they had humbly solicited for their own practice. The ruin of the temple, of the city, and of the public religion of the Jews, was severely felt by the Nazarenes, as in their manners, though not in their faith, they maintained so intimate a connection with their impious countrymen, whose misfortunes were attributed by the Pagans to the contempt, and more justly ascribed by the christians to the wrath, of the supreme deity. The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan, where that ancient church languished above sixty years in solitude and obscurity. They still enjoyed the comfort of making frequent and devout visits to the *Holy City*, and the hope of being one day restored to those seats which both nature and religion taught them to love as well as to revere. But at length under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities; and the Romans exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the rights of victory with unusual rigour. The emperor founded, under the name *Ælia Capitolina*, a new city on Mount Sion, to which he gave the privileges of a colony—and denouncing the severest penalties against any of the Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders. The Nazarenes had only one way left to escape the common proscription, and the force of truth was on this occasion assisted by the influence of temporal advantages. They elected Marcus for their bishop, a prelate of the race of Gentiles, and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic law, in the practice of which they had persevered above a century. By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices, they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian, and more firmly cemented their union with the catholic church.

When the name and honors of the church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Sion, the crimes of heresy and scism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes, which refused to accompany their Latin bishop.—They still preserved their former habitation of Pella, spread themselves into the villages adjacent to Damascus, and formed an inconsiderable church in the city of Bærea, or, as it

is now called, of Aleppo in Syria. The name of Nazarenes, was deemed too honourable for those christian Jews—and they soon received, from the supposed poverty of their understanding, as well as of their condition, the contemptuous epithet of Ebionites. In a few years after the return of the church of Jerusalem, it became a matter of doubt and controversy, whether a man who sincerely acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, but who still continue to observe the law of Moses, could possibly hope for salvation. The humane temper of Justin Martyr inclined him to answer this question in the affirmative; and though he expressed himself with the most guarded diffidence, he ventured to determine in favor of such an imperfect christian, if he were content to practice the Mosaic ceremonies, without pretending to assert their general use of necessity.

GIBBON.

FOR sale by the editor, (price 1 dollar) at No. 26 Chatham-street, the *PRINCIPLES OF NATURE*, or a Development of the Moral Causes of Happiness and Misery among the Human Species, second edition, with five new chapters, upon the following subjects:—Origin of Moral Evil, and the means of its Ultimate Extirpation from the Earth; that Moral Principles are not founded upon Theological Ideas, nor upon any Sectarian Modification of these Ideas, but upon a basis as immortal and as indestructible as Human Existence itself; Universal Benevolence; Moses, Jesus, and Mahomet; Philosophical Immortality.

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